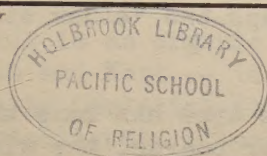


To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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Amsterdam and the Rural Churches

By Ralph L. Williamson*

The rural churches have a vital concern in the meeting to be held in Amsterdam to formally launch the World Council of Churches. The formation of the World Council comes at a grave and opportune time in the developing world events. In a darkening world picture it is our brightest ray of hope. As the Roman Catholic Church held the world together in the era when the Roman Empire was crumbling, so now the Protestant and Eastern Orthodox churches may find themselves called into being to provide a world-wide unity. At any rate it is more true today than in 1935 when Dr. John R. Mott said: "The Christian forces must unite on a more comprehensive scale."¹ That scale is global in geographical extent and well-nigh universal in religious inclusiveness except for the Roman Catholic Church.

Amsterdam has become the current symbol for ecumenicity. This old term has recently become familiar to us as rapid strides have been made toward church unity and cooperation on a scale never before realized. Dr. Mackay of Princeton defines the movement as follows: "The ecumenical movement is a movement towards Christian solidarity in life and work throughout the inhabited globe, that is to say, wherever Christians live and move and have their being upon this earth."²

Those with a special concern for the Christianizing of rural life must inquire as to the significance of the Amsterdam meeting and of the World Council of Churches for the rural church. An understanding of the events leading up to Amsterdam will be helpful to us.

DEVELOPMENTS LEADING TO AMSTERDAM

The Amsterdam Conference is the fruition of a long line of historical

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¹ John R. Mott, *Cooperation and the World Mission*, p. 9, International Missionary Council. New York

² John A. Mackay, "The Ecumenical Goal" in *Toward Worldwide Christianity*, vol. 4, page 42, of the Inter-Seminary Series.

developments. There is, of course, the prayer of Jesus in the Garden that "they may all be one." In modern times Christian men have often returned to that desire of the Master's and have dreamed of Christian unity. More than a century ago something like the World Council of Churches was proposed, but it is only within the memory of living men that genuine growth of the idea has come.

A helpful analysis of the three stages of this development is offered by John R. Mott, who is perhaps the "elder statesman" of worldwide ecumenicity. He says:

"The clock has struck, the time has come when the leaders and supporters of the missionary societies or boards, the missions, and the churches should enter whole-heartedly upon the third stage of cooperation. The first stage was the period preceding the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 -- the period when experiments were initiated which were ultimately multiplied into a large and increasing number of detached pieces of cooperative effort scattered all over the world. The second stage embraced the years between the Edinburgh Conference and the meeting of the International Missionary Council at Jerusalem in 1928 -- the period which has as its distinctive characteristic the creation and development in many parts of the world of national and international agencies, or councils, for the express purpose of inaugurating and fostering interdenominational, international and inter-racial cooperation. Moreover, during this second period cooperative or union projects, largely local or regional in scope, though sometimes also national, continued to multiply at an almost geometrical rate. The third stage, upon which we entered at Jerusalem in 1928, is the one in which the Christian forces related to the missionary enterprise pooled not only knowledge and experience but also plans in the making, personalities, funds, names, and increasingly, administration. It is thus the period in which the implications of cooperation are taken, generally speaking, much more seriously than ever before. ---We have reached the critical point---at which cooperation either must go very much farther, and that soon, or has already gone too far."

These words were written in 1935. During the intervening period we have "gone much farther" -- as Dr. Mott wished -- and have entered another period, that of the operation of a World Council under a Provisional Committee. We live in the midst of a time of unifying rather than of diversifying tendencies in Christianity. This is true throughout the globe.

Three great international bodies have been mainly instrumental in the formation of the World Council. They are the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 which was followed by the Jerusalem Conference of 1928 and the Madras Conference of 1938; the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work, meeting first at Stockholm in 1925 and again at Oxford in 1937; and the World Conference on Faith and Order which met at Lausanne in 1927 and then at Edinburgh in 1937.

The International Missionary Council arose in 1921 and has had a large share in the developments leading up to Amsterdam. Particularly has it been a chief factor in the participation of the younger churches in forming the World Council. Dr. Van Dusen says: "Cooperation on a grand scale has gone ⁴

³ op. cit. p. 11

⁴ H. P. Van Dusen, *World Christianity: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, p. Abingdon-Cokesbury Press. Nashville, 1947.

farther and deeper in mission lands than in most western countries."

AMSTERDAM'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR RURAL CHURCHES

Amsterdam is of great significance to the rural churches of the world — and no less so to those of the United States. Many of the meanings are shared with urban churches, but others are primarily or solely rural. It seems important to understand what some of them may be, and also why they have significance for rural people.

1) Amsterdam is significant for rural people because of the very numbers of the people in the world who are rural and who will be represented there. Some two-thirds of the world's population live in rural areas — overseas missions are predominantly rural. Even in a country as industrial and urban as America we find a majority of the Protestant churches and almost half of the membership to be rural.

2) Individual rural churches throughout the world are as a rule ready to participate in the ecumenical movement on some local or regional level. In South India, there is the new Union Church. In the Belgian Congo, there is a cathedral-like Protestant Church in Elizabethville instead of some twenty weak churches; in China, the churches may be members of the China Christian Council; and in the homeland such states as Ohio and New York have from 150 to 175 united churches.

3) Rural churches have a stake in the impetus which is sure to flow from Amsterdam and thereby speed up cooperation at top levels of the ecclesiastical structures. The present moves toward the study of organic union in America will likely feel the influence of Amsterdam to an unusual degree for a Conference is to be held in the fall within a few weeks after the delegates return from Europe at which the duly elected representatives of the denominations will be asked to consider setting up a body to study the desirability and the means of bringing about organic union on a widespread scale within the next decade. It was to build up sentiment for such a meeting that a group sponsored the meetings in the fall of 1947 by Dr. E. Stanley Jones in 30 key cities at which it is claimed 400,000 signatures were secured on cards stating the individual's willingness to work and pray for organic union of some type.

The attendance of rural people at the previous Jones' meetings was probably small since they were held in major cities. However, they are interested as much, if not more than urban people. The excessive over-churching which prevails in small rural communities has led to more unions of the organic type in rural localities than in urban and thereby built up favorable attitudes for denominational unions.

4) Rural churches should be interested in Amsterdam because of the impetus of the spirit generated there will likely result in more ecumenicity at the "grassroots level". Elmore H. McKee, although a pastor above "the sidewalks of New York", has stressed the need for what he also calls "grassroots" ecumenicity, and he says: "Ecumenical headquarters need 'grassroots' encouragement." ⁵ Rural churches can give it.

However, localized ecumenicity, especially of the organic union types, is most difficult. Often local people find opposition on the part of denominational executives. Some of the most notable leaders in the World Council and

⁵ Elmore H. McKee, "Implementing the Ecumenical Ideal at the Parish Level", p. 224 in *Toward Worldwide Christianity*, vol. 4, The Inter-seminary Series.

Federal Council of Churches are frequently found opposing union when it comes down to the practical situation in over-churched rural communities. Fear of losing some denominational advantage is often a factor but more often the reason seems to be more basic, namely, a fear or inability to grapple with real problems where the group relationships of people are as intimate as they are in local congregations. On the other hand there are an increasing number of regional executives on the secondary level where they must deal with local group relationships constantly, who are dealing constructively with the problem of over-churching.

Dr. H. Paul Douglass of the Federal Council of Churches is responsible for the statement that there are believed to be about 2500 communities in the United States where local unions have been affected. New York State now has over 160, of which all but a handful are in rural communities. The number is increasing almost monthly yet hundreds of communities remain in which severe over-churching can be cured only if there is consolidation of congregations. Then there are numerous other cases where the competition is not quite so severe but still union would result in much greater effectiveness in spiritual power and program. Many communities might well follow the example of West Winfield, N. Y., where the three Protestant churches -- Baptist, Congregational, and Methodist -- united in 1946 into a federation which is releasing great new resources of spiritual power in the community. Two people are employed as the religious staff of the community; the Director of Religious Education is a Baptist, while the former pastor is a Congregationalist and the present pastor is a Methodist.

The mission fields have made much progress. It is of interest to note that many of the leaders in the younger churches are challenging the churches at the home base on the matter of organic union, particularly at the top levels. For example, a Nanking layman is quoted as saying:

"Increasingly, thinking Chinese are asking the reason for the many divisions of the church. We resent the fact that the western churches have, without consulting us, perpetuated their nice ecclesiastical and theological differences in China. Here they mean nothing to the people. We did not ask for a divided church; we want to be known as Chinese Christians who can all stand together without being split up into fifty denominations. Many of us resent this situation and it is undoubtedly keeping many highly intelligent Chinese from affiliating with any church." ⁶

It has long been predicted that some day the younger churches would be sending missionaries to the older churches. The thought occurs, what if that should soon come to pass and the burden of their message should be a forthright challenge to organic union of Christ's followers in the churches of the West? This might easily come to pass; some of our overseas visitors have already delivered their souls on this question while here for other purposes.

5) Our rural churches should be interested in Amsterdam and the ecumenical spirit because of the many similarities between rural church work everywhere across the world. This first came home forcefully to the writer a few years ago when with others from the home field, he sat with the committee of missionaries working on the volume later issued under the title, "The Christian

⁶ quoted, pp. 230-1, "The Economic Basis of the Church", vol. 5, Madras Conference Report. International Missions Conference. 1939.

Mission Among Rural People." ⁷ Again and again the principles and methods being advocated for the overseas work were those which we have arrived at for our work at home. It is this which has made the book and others, as for instance Felton's "The Rural Church in the Far East", so valuable to the discerning rural pastor in the homeland. That there is a unity of work among rural people across the world is again shown by a statement from the Jerusalem Missionary Conference of 1928:

"The rural work in mission fields is an organic part of the service demanded by the Church everywhere — East and West — to lead in the effort to build a rural civilization that shall be Christian to the core. This effort looks toward the development of an intelligent, literate and efficient rural population, well organized and well led, who shall share the economic, the political, and the social emancipation, as well as the continued advancement of the masses of men, who shall participate fully in world affairs and who shall be moved and inspired by the Christian spirit." ⁸

6) Finally, our rural churches should be interested in Amsterdam because it is a powerful symbol of unity in a world which is sadly divided. It is true they share this interest with urban churches. As we look at the world today the only clearcut picture of world unity is that we see in the World Council of Churches.

Dr. Kenyon L. Butterfield discussed the relation of world peace to rural people when addressing the Jerusalem Conference and stated that it was directly connected with the farmer's place in society. It was also stated at the Conference that with cooperation between all those working in rural life on behalf of the churches so much excess power would be released that it could go far to solve world problems. Certainly one can readily concur in the implication that the rivalries and competitions of religious forces across the world constitute a major loss of leadership toward the solution of many vast problems which afflict mankind.

WHAT RURAL CHURCHES SHOULD DO

The question remains as to what the rural churches should do regarding all that it is represented by Amsterdam. The following is suggested for consideration by local churches as a practical program.

1) A basic undertaking is for pastors and intelligent laymen to become informed regarding the events which are to take place at Amsterdam. The church press is giving considerable publicity and denominational journals will likely give more space to the Council during the next few months. The following books are of first rate importance and might well be used for group as well as individual study:

Van Dusen, H. P. — World Christianity, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.

Abingdon-Cokesbury Press. Nashville. 1947, pp. 302. \$2.50

C. Frederick Nolde, ed. Toward Worldwide Christianity. Vol. 4, The Inter-seminary Series. Harper Bros. New York. 1946, pp. 260. \$3.00

Henry Smith Leiper, ed. Christianity Today. Morehouse-Gorham. New York. 1947.

⁷ Published by Agricultural Missions, Inc., 156 Fifth Ave., New York City

⁸ Vol. VI, p. 288, Jerusalem Conference Report, "The Christian Mission In Relation to Rural Problems."

2) Then it should be urged upon each rural church to enlarge its own area of active cooperation and unity. Two approaches may be made. If the church does not at present belong to a local or county council of churches, it should join at once and take an active part. If there is no such council, the church's leaders should initiate steps leading to the formation of one. Ministerial associations often perform some of the functions of a council, but no such association can be adequate. The active participation of laymen and a comprehensive program of community service through religious work are both essential.

3) Rural churches and individuals should seek a sense of oneness with rural people around the world. An excellent means is to invite into the churches and homes of the community foreign students who are attending universities in the state, and also missionaries who are on furlough.

4) Basic to all our hopes of church union and cooperation is the achievement of spiritual unity. This applies both to ecumenicity in the local field and in the upper levels of the Church. Spiritual unity is to a very large extent a by-product of fellowship in prayer and planning. It comes by a process of growth and takes time to develop — sometimes a very long time. Union worship services and prayer meetings have an important place in developing spiritual unity, unity at the deeper levels. That plan is weak indeed which has not created it before being put into operation. Cooperation, as Dr. Mott has said, "is a spiritual quality and a spiritual achievement." Dr. Mott also quotes on this subject the statement of Alexander M. Allan of Colombia:

"Cooperation is an organic quality, not an abstract relation. Cooperation, like faith, worketh by love. It is not nearly so much the problems which wreck cooperation as the distorted seeing of them by people who have lost perspective through neglect of unhurried, silent meditation, of prayer, and of attentiveness unto God. Union with Christ is not only the quickest way toward the solution of the Church's problems; it is the only way." ⁹

THE VISION

The perfect unity of the Church as the Body of Christ in both a spiritual and an organic sense is doubtless a far off event. Perhaps it will never come to pass. Nevertheless, an increasing number of people have faith that Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane will one day become a reality, and accordingly desire to do their part in their time. Great faith and vision are needed whether one is primarily concerned with local or world-wide ecumenicity. Above all love is needed. For let it be remembered that "Cooperation begins where love begins and ends where love ends." ¹⁰

⁹ Cooperation and the World Mission, pp. 43-4

¹⁰ op. cit., p. 36